

# Volti di Roma

*An artistic/ethnographic/photographic research project and accompanying paper by  
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## The Inspiration

History is a tale inevitably told from the perspective of the wealthy, and those in power. In Rome, a city with a story stretching back 28 centuries, it was the emperors, popes, and wealthy merchants who built the artistic structures, wrote the documents, and funded the sculptures that would later survive the test of time to aid modern-day scholars in their attempts to reconstruct that story. But what about the poor, the homeless, and the destitute? What about the people who not only became nameless in the shadows of time, but who were already nameless in their own time? How might our perspective of history shift if we could hear *their* version of the story?

We cannot go back in history to converse with the poor, and as a result, we will never arrive at a whole picture of what the ancient world looked like, or uncover the hidden mysteries of Rome that would inevitably be reflected by their tales and perspectives. But this still poses an important ethical challenge for us today, for in our own time, we are faced with the same issue. We are constantly inundated with the stories and perspectives of the wealthy, celebrities, and those with political power. Meanwhile there are millions of people all over the world whose names we don't know, and whose stories we don't get to hear. How might our understanding of the world we are living in change by a confrontation with their reality? Centuries from now, what kind of story will the people of the future be able to tell about our time, based on the artifacts that we are now leaving behind?

Vincent Van Gogh, the famous painter from the Netherlands who is most well-known for his sweeping impressionist landscapes, left us with legacy that is probably far more valuable to humanity as a whole: hundreds of drawings and paintings that depicted the lives and portraits of the poor people in his own time. These were the people with whom he most strongly identified, and surrounded himself. “Do I lower myself,” he asked sarcastically in a letter to his brother, “by living with the people I draw? Do I lower myself when I go into the houses of laborers and poor people and when I receive them in my studio?”<sup>1</sup> In another letter he writes, “What am I in the eyes of most people? A good-for-nothing, an eccentric and disagreeable man, somebody who has no position in society and never will have. Very well, even if that were true, I should want to show by my work what there is in the heart of such an eccentric man, of such a nobody.”<sup>2</sup>

Having failed in all his family’s aspirations and expectations for his success, and having traveled to Brinage in southern Belgium at age 25 to live for over a year as a Christian ascetic among the poor coal miners who lived there, Van Gogh understood on a deeply personal level the importance of revealing honestly the inner, lived realities of the “nobodies” of society. As one writer observes, “if he could not alleviate the hard life of the poor Dutch peasant, at least he could show his compassion in drawings and paintings.”<sup>3</sup> In another letter to his brother Van Gogh posed the question, “Do you know that it is very, very necessary for honest people to remain in art? Hardly anyone knows that the secret of beautiful work lies to a great extent in truth and sincere sentiment.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin Mudrick, “The Brother of Us All,” *Hudson Review* 32 (1980): 604.

<sup>2</sup> Dana Lynn Joseph, “Vincent,” *American Way*, July 15, 1990, 52.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Wallace, *The World of Van Gogh* (New York: Time Life), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph, “Vincent,” 55.

One group of people who did understand the importance of portraying “truth and sincere sentiment” in art were the neo-realists of post-World War II Italian cinema. Italian neorealism is generally characterized by stories set among the poor and working class, filmed on location with nonprofessional actors (usually the actual poor and working-class Italian people themselves) that reflect the poverty-stricken and desperate conditions of the time. Sergio Pacifici points out that these characteristics represented a deep shift in the conscience and values of the Italian people. He writes, “the Italian artist learned not to fear confessing that he had been afraid, that he was poor and wretched, but that the economic poverty of his people would never prevent him from exploring the mystery of existence, the social and political injustices, present and past mistakes – so as to grow, and help others grow.”<sup>5</sup>

In the artistic works of both Vincent Van Gogh and the Italian neo-realists, we find that the motivating force behind the stories they told and the people they portrayed was not some ever-elusive ideal of objective representation,<sup>6</sup> but the unabashed passion and clarity of genuine human empathy that allows one person to truly see another as deeply as they see themselves. Rosellini declared that his most well-known film, *Open City*, “is the film...of everybody’s fear, but mine above all. I, too, had to hide; I, too, fled;

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<sup>5</sup> Sergio Pacifici, “Notes Toward a Definition of Neorealism,” *Yale French Studies* 56 (1956): 51.

<sup>6</sup> As an artist, who also majored in media as an undergraduate with much analysis on theories of ethnographic and social research, I do not concede much to the idea that there is any such thing as objectivity in social scientific research. While we may be able to obtain objective data about human behavior through observation, any interpretation or meaning derived from such data will inevitably be subjective, a process which often occurs so automatically that we are left unaware of its inherent bias. Due to the inconvenient psychological realities of empathy and confirmation bias, any human being studying other human beings will inevitably form biased conclusions based on the facts of one’s own experience. Those who pretend to present “objective” material are more likely to be subconsciously presenting their own biases in misleading ways. It is therefore my belief that audiences are more likely to arrive at something of an authentic presentation of reality when the author is willing to enter into a presentation that is transparent about the biases driving her work and the role that she has played in shaping how the story played out. Further elaboration of this viewpoint, which also supports the use of my current project as an example of research, is offered by John & Malcolm Collier, *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 154-156 & 197-201.

I, too, had friends who were captured and killed.”<sup>7</sup> These artists found a way to express and alleviate their own deepest sufferings by telling the stories of others like them who had suffered, and in this way they were able to find meaning and redemption in their own experience while also offering works of monumental artistic value, works that allow others to create their own sense of meaning and discover their own redemption.

### The Idea

Three years ago, while I was living in San Francisco, CA with no money but lots of heart, I came up with a similar idea of taking photographed portraits of the people I often spoke with on the streets who were experiencing homelessness. I hoped, with permission, to publish their photographs and stories in a book entitled, “The Real Face of San Francisco,” with the proceeds going to support people experiencing homelessness in the city. While attending a study abroad course in Rome, Italy, I was deeply moved by the work and spirit of the Italian Neo-realists and the works of Van Gogh on display at the National Museum of Modern Art. Van Gogh’s portraits of the poor and working-class in particular inspired a return to my own deep desire to artistically represent the faces and stories of the poor in a way that would not only provide a penetrating look at the other side of life in the Eternal city, but also to deeply and personally redeem my own experiences with homelessness and the loss of dignity that comes from being “unseen.”

Of course, strong inner convictions have little regard for logistics. The most obvious barrier to pursuing this project in Rome was language, since I was not exactly fluent yet in Italian. How can I possibly introduce myself and my project, or understand the responses of the people with whom I spoke? The idea seemed to me like folly, until

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<sup>7</sup> Pacifici, “Notes Toward a Definition of Neorealism,” 51.

one sunny afternoon while I was strolling through the Piazza del Pietro, I saw a man sitting in the middle of the circle, facing the famous Vatican basilica. He had a small statue of St. Francis set out in front of him, a worn bible and prayer book by his side, and was wearing a brown beanie hat that said “Assisi.”

After standing awkwardly a few feet away for two or three minutes, I finally turned towards him and he unexpectedly smiled directly back at me and said, “Hi!” I quickly approached him. “English?” I asked. “Yes!” he said. His name was George Szabo, from Sydney, Australia. He described himself as a devout Catholic, but said he felt that the materialism and pomp of the papacy had gone too far. “Sell all those candlesticks and that chalice, at least,” he said with such longing. “It’s too much. And the money...you know, if all the religions did the same...we could save humanity!” Waving disappointedly towards the Vatican he said, “but all religions are like this.”

I asked him why he was sitting there in the middle of the piazza. “I’m just here praying,” he said, “and I just had this [the Saint Francis statue] in my bag. This wasn’t intentional. I’m not staging a protest or anything...but you know, now, in the next few days, I think I will change it. I will make a point before I leave. I’m going to make a scene... without being offensive.” I told the man that I thought he sounded like a prophet. “We’re all prophets,” he said. “You know what *he* did, don’t you?” George asked, pointing to his Francis statue. “He came to the Vatican *in rags*! The church needs to be renewed by that kind of a spirit.” I thanked George for his time, and for the inspiration he had given me, and told him a little about my project. “Yes, talk to the poor,” he emphatically commanded. “Those are the stories that people need to hear. Talk to the poor!”

Okay. After that, the project was definitely on. I had to talk to the poor. I scribbled a brief introduction to myself onto a piece of paper, and asked the professor at the facoltà where we were studying to translate it into Italian for me. He happily obliged. The message explained who I was, the nature of my project, and asked for a photo in exchange for 1 Euro, along with a request that they write down their name and anything else that they would like to share about their story, their situation, their views on life, or anything else. It was all I could do to give it a try.

### The Unexpected Outcome

The first man I approached was someone who had caught my eye from the very first day I arrived in Rome. Every morning, I saw him sitting outside the steps of the Waldensian church, holding out his hand with a smile. I slowly walked up to him one sunny day and held out my little piece of paper with the introduction scrawled on it. He glanced at it quickly, and then looked at me, shaking his head no. I wondered if he thought I was trying to sell him something. “Per favore?” I asked, still holding it out. He shook his head even more emphatically. “No...Romani...Roma...Romani...” *Rome? Roman?* I didn’t understand him at first, but after a few moments it finally hit me. “Romanian?” I asked. “Si,” he nodded. Oh. He is from Romania...which means he probably knows about as much Italian as I do.

At first, I thanked him and began to walk away. But then, something made me stop and turn back. I decided to sit down beside him for a bit, which he didn’t seem to mind. He had a very kind presence. I then thought I would see how far I could get with charades. It was pretty easy, I discovered, to ask him if I could take his picture in exchange for 1 Euro. Money is its own language, after all. But getting his name proved a

bit more difficult. There's nothing you can point to for "name." At a loss, I decided to bring Jesus into it. "Kristen" I said, pointing to myself. "Jesus" I said, pointing to the very large crucifix hanging around his neck. Then I pointed to the man himself, with the silent question on my face.

What the man must've understood was that I was a *Christian*...like Jesus. Sheer delight then came across his face. "Orthodox!" he said, pointing to himself. "Catholic?" he asked, pointing to me. "No... Anglican" I replied, for lack of a better explanation. Genuinely happy to have found a friend in Christ, he began to unravel the plastic bag that he had been holding in his lap, and from it he revealed a worn-out Bible, old with mildew stains. Tucked inside were scraps of notes and prayers and cards of saints. He lovingly fingered each one as he flipped slowly through the pages. Then he pulled out a card with a picture of the Sacred Heart and displayed it proudly. We smiled together as we sat there in silence on the steps, foreigner to foreigner, but brother and sister in Christ, sharing an apotheosis of the moment in which I understood that our being together then was far more important than me somehow getting a hold of his name for my photo project.

Eventually he turned and looked once more at my paper with the written introduction, trying to decipher its meaning. Suddenly and excitedly, he began pointing to the south. Whatever he thought it was that was look for was apparently to the South. I decided to go along with it so that he could feel helpful, and I got up, thanking him. "Kristen," I said, reaching out with one hand to shake his, and indicating myself with the other. This he understood. "Giovanni," he said, pointing to himself and shaking my hand. John. His name was John.

In the few remaining days I had in Rome, the demands of the course and my studies left me with little free time to pursue my project to the extent that I had hoped.

But in the time that I did have, I managed to successfully approach five other people. Interestingly, I had similar results with each. As it turned out, none of them were from Rome. One woman, who called herself Elizabeth, said that she was from Bologna. She was my only Italian subject, although she was illiterate and unable to read my written introduction. Another man, who spoke English, went by the name of John Johnson. He was a refugee from Rwanda, who had arrived in 1995 seeking political asylum, but was not granted it (and who, incidentally, would not allow me to take his photograph). The other four people I spoke with were all from Romania. None of them were able to read through my brief introduction, much less offer me any real account of their own story.

Though this was a frightfully tiny sampling, the outcome of my little social/artistic experiment certainly implied a demographic of homelessness in Rome that is largely comprised of immigrants, and particularly Romanians. This raised questions for me about the immigration situation in Rome, and the relationship between the two countries. Why do so many Romanians end up in the city, and why do so many of them end up begging in the streets? How are Romanian immigrants treated by Roman citizens?

### Romas in Roma

Obtaining the most current and accurate statistics on immigration and homelessness in Rome is difficult, since this information comes from the city council, which publishes its data in Italian. However, according to a secondary source, Rome's city council estimates from 2007 indicated that there were 7,000 people sleeping on the streets, with the actual number of the city's homeless likely to be much higher, given all

the difficulties of obtaining realistic estimates.<sup>8</sup> Of those that have sought help from the city's 24-hour social operations service, 75% were of foreign nationality, with Romanians representing the largest group at 40%.<sup>9</sup>

According to a 2005 monitoring report from the CeSPI (Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale), Romanians constituted the majority of foreign-born citizens in Rome as compared to other nationalities. This report also cited some of the most important problems faced by Romanian migrants: "the housing issue, the access to Italian courses for secondary school students, the long duration usually associated to the request of an extension of the residence permit, and the absence of a location for migrants to socialize."<sup>10</sup>

In a 1992 article published in the *International Migration Review*, Erich Kussbach explained that democracy, individual freedom and human rights, combined with economic prosperity, high standard of living and social progress have made the situation in Western Europe fundamentally different from that of Eastern European countries. "Under the prevailing circumstances," he writes, "it is obvious that the economic gap between Eastern and Western Europe will continue to exist for a while, despite the fundamental changes in the East. Persisting economic disparities, as a matter of necessity, entail migratory movements. Deficiency in the East and abundance in the West will create considerable push and pull effects."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "Homeless in Rome," Wanted in Rome, published August 28, 2007, accessed January 31, 2011, [http://www.wantedinrome.com/news/news.php?id\\_n=3559](http://www.wantedinrome.com/news/news.php?id_n=3559).

<sup>9</sup> "Homeless in Rome."

<sup>10</sup> "Monitoring Report 15-31 March," CeSPI, accessed January 31, 2011, <http://www.cespi.it/migracion2/FrontOrient/Monitoring%20Report%203.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Erich Kussbach, "European Challenge: East-West Migration," *International Migration Review* 26 (1992): 647-648.

But why the distinctly high concentration of *Romanian* immigrants? Specifically of the situation in Romania, Kussbach observed that, “under the Ceausescu regime...systematic violation of human rights, including the rights of ethnic minorities, was a widely known phenomenon. Since the collapse of the communist dictatorship, the human rights situation has gradually been improving. Yet tensions and animosities between minority groups and the Romanian majority have partially survived and are still favoring migration.”<sup>12</sup> Romania also joined the European Union in 2007, making it much easier for Romanians to travel west, and practical factors such as proximity and climate, along with the city’s size and reputation also likely contribute to reasons why Rome is such a popular destination for Romanian immigrants who are willing to risk leaving their homes in search for a better life.

Certainly, there are local organizations in Rome that seek to address these trends and serve the needs of migrant people. Caritas Roma, the local affiliate of Caritas, an international peace and human rights organization, offers a variety of services on behalf of immigrants living in Rome, including food, lodging, healthcare, and help looking for work.<sup>13</sup> The CeSPI report from 2005 also references a local association founded by Romanian students, to support recently arrived immigrants and help them to integrate into Roman society, while also combating “any possible negative image associated to the Romanian migrants’ presence in Italy.”<sup>14</sup>

But they appear to be fighting an uphill battle. Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project over the past decade indicate a strong anti-

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<sup>12</sup> Kussbach, “European Challenge: East-West Migration,” 649.

<sup>13</sup> “All Roads Lead To Rome: Immigration in Italian Capital,” Caritas Roma, accessed January 31, 2011, [http://www.caritas.org/activities/women\\_migration/AllRoadsLeadToRome.html](http://www.caritas.org/activities/women_migration/AllRoadsLeadToRome.html).

<sup>14</sup> “Monitoring Report.”

immigration sentiment in Italy. “Italians were more likely than any other public included in the 47-nation survey to see immigration as a big problem in their country.”

Additionally, a whopping 94% of Italians considered it to be a *big* problem, including 64% who considered it a “very big problem.”<sup>15</sup> This data represents the prevailing attitudes as of 2007, and it’s important to keep in mind that during this time Italy had the fastest-growing immigrant population in Europe, with immigration numbers that placed the country almost on par with the United States. 700,000 immigrants arrived in Italy during 2006, mostly from Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania.<sup>16</sup>

The Global Attitudes Project surveys also indicated equally negative views of immigration from Eastern European countries as compared to migrants from the Middle East and Africa.<sup>17</sup> However, negative views of Romanians in particular, and legal actions taken against them have swelled in recent years as a result of tragic crime incidents like the one in 2007, when a 47-year-old Italian woman named Giovanna Reggiani was brutally murdered by a man from Transylvania. The incident was followed by an emergency meeting of Italian cabinet members that swiftly passed a law ordering police to comb immigrant ghettos and begin arresting and deporting any Romanians found there without permits. They were also urged to pull down settlement camps to prevent any Romanians from returning. The EU commissioner for justice, freedom, and security offered his support of the efforts, saying: “What has to be done is simple. Go into a nomad camp in Rome...and ask them: ‘Can you tell me where you live?’ If they say they

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<sup>15</sup> “Widespread Anti-Immigrant Sentiment in Italy,” Pew Research Center Publications, last updated January 31, 2011, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1461/italy-widespread-anti-immigrant-sentiment>.

<sup>16</sup> Malcom Moore, “Italy to Deport 1000 Romanians after Robbery,” *The Telegraph*, November 2, 2007, accessed January 31, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1568167/Italy-to-deport-100-Romanians-after-robbery.html>.

<sup>17</sup> “Widespread Anti-Immigration Sentiment in Italy.”

do not know, take them and send them home to Romania. That is how the European directive works.”<sup>18</sup>

While the EU directive cited by the commissioner specifically states that expulsions should not be targeted at any one particular ethnic group, Romanians have clearly been marked as the specific concern of city officials. In 2007, Rome’s mayor Walter Veltroni claimed that “before January...Rome was the safest big city in the world. In the first seven months of the year, 75 per cent of arrests or murder, rape and robbery have been Romanians.”<sup>19</sup> Temporary immigrant camps have been repeatedly set on fire in Rome, and replaced by villages on the fringes of the city that would house immigrants and keep them under police watch, leading to a response of vigilante attacks. All of the Romanians who were arrested in this effort were brought to detention centers, where they were kept until able to plead their case before a justice of the peace.<sup>20</sup>

While it has been four years since the murder of Reggiani and the subsequent outburst of overtly anti-Romanian actions taken by the Italian government, it is unlikely that much has changed in terms of the deep anti-Romanian sentiment and distrust among the Italian people in general. As a result, it is not difficult to imagine the enormous challenges faced by Romanian migrants to Rome, especially those like the ones that I met, who are barely fluent or literate in the Italian language. As I discovered for myself after just a few weeks in Rome, trying to navigate the necessities of daily life is difficult enough for anyone who is not comfortable with the language. The ease of my travel experience was made possible by the enormous hospitality I received as an *American*.

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<sup>18</sup> Malcom Moore, “Italy Starts Rounding Up Romanian Immigrants,” *The Telegraph*, November 2, 2007, accessed January 31, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1568168/Italy-starts-rounding-up-Romanian-immigrants.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Moore, “Italy to Deport 1000 Romanians after Robbery.”

<sup>20</sup> Moore, “Italy Starts Rounding Up Romanian Immigrants.”

The Italian people continually offered their patience towards me and their willingness to help. With such attitudes being harder to come by for Romanians, it is no wonder that we find so many of them out begging on the sidewalks and in the piazzas for food and Euros.

### Conclusions

This small bit of research into the immigration relationship between Romania and Rome offers some important contextual grounding and insight, as well as a clearer lens through which we might begin to see and understand the individuals depicted in these portraits. While I may not have been successful in my attempt to relay their individual stories, thoughts, or feelings, I *was* able to capture their faces, and as Van Gogh and the postwar Italian neorealists understood so well, a picture can often substitute for a thousand words. So I also learned, that nonverbal communication and a moment of silence shared between two strangers in a foreign land can be something very profound.

What is incredible to me now as I reflect back on the experiences I shared with each of these people, is how open and receptive they were to me. In spite of their destitute conditions and the prevailing attitudes against them, each of them was willing, in their own way, to reach out and try to understand my gestures and requests, which I'm sure at times must've seemed very bizarre. Some of my encounters were heavier or more difficult than others, like when the man from Rwanda told me of the troubles he had faced. But in the end, through genuine smiles and the laughter of our common foolishness and vulnerability, we were brought to a place of understanding that somehow stretched beyond words. We were able to share in the raw humanity of seeing and being seen by one another. That was its own conclusion, and perhaps the most important one of all.



George Szabo, from Sydney, Australia  
*photo taken at Piazza del Pietro, January 10, 2011.*



Giovanni, from Romania

*photo taken at the Waldensian church on Via Lucrezio Caro, January 11, 2011.*



“Elisabetta,” from Bologna, Italy.  
*photo taken on Lungotevere Amaldo da Brescia on January 15, 2011.*



Cadarar, from Romania.  
*photo taken on the steps leading up to Villa Borghese on January 16, 2011*



Costandina, from Romania  
*photo taken at the Piazza del Popolo on January 16, 2011.*



Prodan Viorel, from Romania  
*photo taken near Via Cola di Rienzo on January 16, 2011*

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